

**Media Selection and Partisan Fragmentation:
A Comparative Study of Advanced Western Democracies**

Michael F. Meffert
Leiden University
mmeffert@gmail.com

David Nicolas Hopmann
University of Southern Denmark
dnh@sam.sdu.dk

Abstract

The paper assesses the phenomenon of partisan fragmentation and polarization of media audiences in comparative perspective, comparing the USA with a wide range of European media systems. While the multiplication of news channels in the modern information society offers an unprecedented opportunity for more selectivity, it does not necessarily mean that voters actually engage in widespread selective exposure. The research draws on both older and recent data to first compare and contrast indicators of ideological and partisan polarization as well as media bias perceptions for the USA, Germany, and Greece. The second step is a (preliminary) large scale comparison of ideological polarization of audiences of mainstream media sources across 29 media systems in advanced western democracies. The results suggest that the U.S. is an exceptional case when it comes to the ideological polarization of television audiences but rather average in the case of newspapers readers. European media systems show a high degree of variation.

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Partisan fragmentation as a result of selective exposure in the modern information society is a doomsday scenario popular among some U.S. scholars (i.e., Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). While there cannot be any doubt that the multiplication of information channels offers an unprecedented opportunity for increased selectivity, it does not necessarily mean that voters actually engage in widespread selective exposure, either because they have no inclination to do so or because the media system does not provided the requisite supply of partisan media sources (Hopmann, van Aelst, and Legnante, 2012; Wonneberger, 2011). The goal of this paper is to assess the phenomenon of “de facto selectivity” (Sears and Freedman, 1967) for political information sources in a comparative perspective, comparing the U.S. situation with a wide range of European media systems. The research draws on older and very recent data to determine whether partisan fragmentation at the level of mainstream media sources is a universal phenomenon in advanced Western democracies.¹

There is only very limited previous research on partisan selectivity from a comparative perspective. Most notably, two studies have addressed the question of media-party parallelism, an idea similar to selective exposure. Van Kempen (2007) reported a comparative study of media-party parallelism based on the 1999 European Election Study and found considerable variation across countries. More recently, Goldman and Mutz (2011) compared 11 countries from across the world to find a “friendly media phenomenon” in particular for newspapers. Television, on the other

¹ Fragmentation is sometimes also called segregation or segmentation, two terms that imply either complete separation or a more graduate but overlapping differentiation of groups. Our use of fragmentation corresponds more closely to segmentation, in part because we use aggregated measures in our analyses that cannot (and need not) capture precise individual-level exposure patterns.

hand, was found to facilitate cross-cutting exposure to political information. The data for the latter study came from the Comparative National (or Cross-National) Elections Project (CNEP) and was collected in the early to mid-1990s. Both articles draw on data that is 15 to 20 years old. Therefore, they miss any recent and potentially more dramatic developments due to the rise of new media technologies and changes in media use patterns.

Our research draws both on some older CNEP data as well as the 2009 European Election Studies (EES) and the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) to compare the ideological composition of the audiences for the main television news channels and national newspapers. Our analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we use more detailed survey data from three countries, the USA, Germany, and Greece, to establish and demonstrate the congruence of (aggregated) ideological self-placements of media users, partisan media bias perceptions, and partisan user shares of specific media sources. Next, we use the average ideological (left/right or liberal/conservative) self-placement of media users – de facto ideological selectivity – for a wide range of western democracies to establish the ideological polarization of the main television channels and newspapers. This approach provides initial comparative evidence of ideological segmentation for the main information sources for 29 media systems in 28 countries.

Why Partisan Fragmentation Is Important, and How It Changed

Irrespective of the particular version of democracy one subscribes to, a central premise is the exchange of arguments in order to find the best possible solution. This premise implies exposure to a wide range of arguments, discussing them, and finding a compromise. Consequently, exposure to cross-cutting arguments is a fundamental idea of democracy (e.g., Mutz, 2006). Given the tendency of individuals to be surrounded by like-minded persons at the immediate, interpersonal level, the news media can be seen

as an important source for exposure to diverse arguments (Mutz and Martin, 2001).

Recent developments suggest, however, that media consumption increasingly is deprived of its role as a source for diverse arguments. Historically, when broadcasting news became the dominant source for news in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, the three major networks ABC, CBS, and NBC broadcast their news bulletins simultaneously, reaching a national audience. This scheduling practice implied that even viewers not interested in politics inadvertently were exposed to political news (Prior, 2007). Moreover, since the content of the news bulletins was guided by principles of non-partisanship (Tuchman, 1972), viewers were exposed to a wide range of arguments from all political camps. In short, citizens who wanted to watch television in prime time could neither avoid watching political news nor choose news bulletins in line with their own partisanship.

The advent of cable broadcasting and later satellite and Internet access has brought profound changes. These changes led to an explosion of channels available to viewers, including a much greater diversity in available broadcasting content. Moreover, the major broadcasting networks changed their scheduling practices by removing news bulletins from prime time (Prior, 2007). Due to dramatically increased competition between media outlets, it becomes more difficult, even unrealistic to attract large national audiences, and media outlets have to develop strategies to attract specific groups of viewers (Hamilton, 2004; Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2006). In the words of Daniel Hallin (2006), “in the increasingly fragmented markets that prevail in radio, cable TV and the internet, partisanship can be an important strategy of product differentiation.” As Bennett and Iyengar (2008: 723) argue, “[t]he emergence of Fox News as the cable ratings leader suggests that in a competitive market, politically slanted news programming allows a new organization to create a niche for itself.”

These changes in media supply, both in terms of types of programming and in

terms of partisanship, have important implications. On the one hand, viewers now have even more choice to avoid news bulletins altogether if they are not interested in politics and rather view entertainment or sports programs. The consequences of such news avoidance cannot be understated, causing, for example, increasing knowledge gaps between those interested and those not interested in politics (Prior, 2007). The changes also imply that those less interested in politics – and typically less partisan – are less likely to participate in politics and vote, effectively leading to a partisan polarization of the remaining electorate. Politicians who perceive such a development s will increasingly propose policies catering to their polarized constituencies.

Citizens who are interested in politics can now choose from a much larger news menu, and find information in line with their own partisan preferences. For example, data on media consumption during the 2004 U.S. presidential election campaign documented a striking “extent of partisan selective exposure in the contemporary media environment” (Stroud, 2007: 358; see also Coe et al., 2008). That is, viewers are exposed to news slanted in a way that confirms their own prior beliefs that does not force them to reconsider their stances. Viewers may end up in “small, relatively exclusive communities of interest that never encounter voices of different points of view” (Webster, 2005: 366).

If these arguments are correct, this trend poses a major challenge for the functioning of contemporary democracies. Avoiding exposure to diverse arguments, i.e. arguments both in line and opposed to own political stances, may lead to decreased levels of awareness of others' arguments and, thus, lower levels of tolerance (Mutz, 2002; Price, Cappella, and Nir, 2002). Bennett and Iyengar (2008) even suggest that we are in the process of moving into a new age of “minimal media effects” where media exposure will only cause attitudinal reinforcement. The consequences would be severe. A polarized environment makes political compromise across ideological camps difficult

to achieve, posing a challenge to the very idea of democracy.

A Case of U.S. Exceptionalism, or a General Phenomenon?

The studies cited above refer to one particular media market and political system, the United States. The evidence in this case strongly suggests that we are witnessing changes in both the supply of media outlets and the consumption patterns of partisan news, leading to “a less informed and more polarized electorate” (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008: 724). This raises the question whether this trend is a universal phenomenon across political and media systems or confined to the US.

The number of television channels available to individuals has not only exploded in the U.S., it has done so in Europe as well. Hence, Bennett and Iyengar suggest that Europe will follow the path paved by the U.S. “in the future as more information sources become available in these media markets, and telecommunications monopoly reforms allow broader and cheaper online access” (2010: 39). A key difference to the U.S., however, is the fact that public service broadcasting used to have a monopoly status in most West-European countries, even if the abolishment of European telecommunications monopolies has been well on the way for the last three decades. From the beginning of the 1980s, European countries increasingly liberalized their media policies allowing commercial competitors to enter the markets (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). For example, the majority of household in the Netherlands today receive 50 or more channels (Wonneberger, 2011: 88). These changes in the media markets have clearly increased the competition between broadcasters across Europe. Based on data gathered in Europe and across the world during the 1990s, Goldman and Mutz (2011) suggests that the U.S. are not unique and suggest that “the explosion of channels has meant greater audience fragmentation, which seems unlikely to facilitate greater cross-cutting exposure” in other countries as well. Given these striking

similarities across the Atlantic (and around the world), partisan fragmentation in Europe should approach the U.S. situation. This argument, however, misses profound structural differences.

The explosion of media channels inevitably implies a decreasing audience share for the traditional European public service broadcasters. In most West-European countries, their market share is still around one third (Esser et al., 2012). In the U.S., the share of public service broadcasting is marginal, only around 1 to 2 percent. Two aspects should be noted. First, public service broadcasters in most media systems operate under strict guidelines demanding non-partisan news coverage. That is, they are by law or legal practice obliged to follow a non-partisan approach when covering politics (e.g., CSA, 2000; Starkey, 2007). In several media systems, commercial broadcasters also have to comply with certain public service requirements in order to obtain a broadcasting licence (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008, p. 719). A recent review of partisan biases in news coverage across western countries concludes that a trend toward more slanted news “has remained largely absent across Europe, stressing the ‘exceptional case’ of the USA” (Hopmann et al., 2012: 243). However, whether the absence of such an overall trend toward slanted news has prevented audiences from self-selecting or segregating for partisan or ideological reasons remains an open question.

Second, the strong position of public service broadcasting nurtures a news culture where not only large shares of the population are accustomed to watch news and public affairs programs, but public service broadcasters also set the standard or norms for good journalism (Pfetsch, 1996; Wonneberger, 2011). In fact, it has even been suggested that because broadcasters in Europe do not engage in partisan niche programming, they still manage to reach large audiences with their news:

“With the news market ideologically far less polarized than the one in the United

States, politically less interested viewers seem to be less discouraged to watch the news and, therewith, less inclined to abstain from the news when the number of viewing alternatives increase. As a result, news audiences are less fragmented and specialized” (Wonneberger, 2011, pp. 96–97).

In other words, the U.S. media market is facing a spiral of increasing audience fragmentation along partisan lines where small news audiences force news outlets to cater to specific segments of the audience which in turn leads to more polarized audiences, increasing even further the incentives for media outlets to slant their news.

To the best of our knowledge, no recent data on audience fragmentation across Europe have been published. The study by Goldman and Mutz (2011) does not indicate any exceptional levels of television-party parallelism for the U.S. compared to other countries. In fact, their results document that two European countries, Greece and Italy, stand out as cases where television-party parallelism is exceptionally high. These results are based on data gathered 15-20 years ago. A recent study on audience fragmentation in Germany—the most populated European country—concluded that “the audience of the television channels is nearly perfectly balanced” (Meffert, 2011: 15), that is, there are no signs of partisan fragmentation in Germany. This finding is in line with previous findings on television-party parallelism in Germany based on the 1999 European Election Study data (van Kempen, 2007).

In summary, there are good reasons to doubt that the explosion of European media channels has created a phenomenon of partisan fragmentation similar to the US. It should be noted, however, that this argument applies only to electronic but not print media. For the latter, press-party parallelism has a long tradition in many countries, making the U.S. not an exceptional case. In the end, however, these claims are based on old data in a continuously changing media environment. Reason enough for an up-to-date assessment of the evidence.

Cases and Methods

The analysis starts with a closer look at three countries that represent three different media system types in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) terminology. The USA, representing the North Atlantic liberal model, is used as the reference case for partisan polarization and fragmentation. It will be contrasted with Germany, representing the North and Central European democratic corporatist model. It is a country with a long tradition of strong public broadcasting and thus a least likely case to follow the U.S. developments. The third case is Greece, a representative of the Mediterranean polarized pluralist model. This country has not only a much weaker public broadcasting system, but it also has a media system that went through rapid changes in the last 20 years. After a detailed assessment of these three countries, we turn to a comparative analysis of ideological polarization across 28 European media systems in 27 countries plus the U.S.

The (current and preliminary) research is entirely descriptive and used visual data analysis to compare various indicators of ideological and partisan fragmentation and polarization. The data is exclusively based on individual-level population surveys and relies on respondents' ideological self-placements, their party preferences, their self-reported exposure to specific television channels and newspapers, and their perceptions of media biases in these channels. Our descriptive approach is justified in order to avoid any causal claims about ideological polarization of media and public. The question whether citizens actively choose specific media sources for partisan reasons or whether media sources target their programming to specific partisan groups cannot be resolved with our data. At this point, we only intend to assess *de facto* selectivity, nothing more and nothing less.

Determining the ideological composition of media audiences for specific media requires surveys that not only asked such questions but also include sufficient respondents for individual media sources. With the notable exception of rolling cross-

sectional pre-election surveys with large samples such as the 2008 NAES for the U.S. and the 2009 GLES for Germany, the number of respondents who report exposure to smaller television channels or almost any newspaper is fairly small. The interpretation of the results has to take this into account. That said, the 2009 EES provides fairly detailed media exposure data for both television channels and newspapers and for 28 European countries. This makes a large-scale comparative analysis at least feasible.

Given the use of different data sources, not all operationalizations are identical across countries. The basic approach, however, is similar and quite straightforward. In all surveys, media users are identified by self-reported exposure to specific television channels or programs and newspapers. Some surveys ask explicitly about the use of specific (usually major) media sources while others use open-ended questions to capture a more detailed listing of media sources (or combinations of both). We define a media user as someone who reported exposure to a specific medium between 1 and 7 days per week (in general or in the last week). In most cases, respondents were explicitly asked to provide two or more television and newspaper sources. In these cases, the first two answers (if available) are used to identify a viewer or reader of a specific media source.

Ideological and partisan preferences are based on the ideological self-placements and party preferences of the respondents. The ideological self-placement is based on either a 10-point (without midpoint) or an 11-point (with midpoint) left-right scale for European surveys and a 5-point liberal-conservative scale for U.S. respondents. To make a comparative analysis of European countries and the U.S. possible, the 5-point liberal-conservative scale is rescaled to match the range of the 0-10 left-right scale (that is, 0, 2.5, 5, 7.5, 10) used by the EES. Party preferences are based on party identification for U.S. respondents and party sympathy or closeness ratings for European respondents. In the detailed analyses of Germany and Greece, the party preferences are further

combined into two party blocks, that is, into supporters of left or right parties.²

Partisan bias perceptions are based on the perceived party (Germany and Greece) or candidate (USA) bias in the media sources named by a respondent. Similar to the party preferences, the bias perceptions are combined into left or right party blocks. Those (few) perceiving a bias toward both a left *and* a right party (or both a Democratic *and* a Republican candidate) are classified as perceiving no partisan bias. The combination in party blocks loses information about specific parties, but in our three specific countries, bias perceptions toward other (and smaller) than the two major parties are so rare that it does not affect the substantive conclusions.

In the first part of the analysis, partisan preferences and bias perceptions for specific media sources are transformed and aggregated into left bias ratios. Among all respondents who use a specific media source such as CNN, the number of respondents who identify as Democrat are divided by the number of respondents who identify as Democrat or Republican (excluding those without a party preference). The resulting ratio ranges from 0 to 1 and indicates the fraction of Democratic identifiers among all party identifiers for a specific medium. Similarly, the left party bias perceptions are based on the ratio of left party bias perceptions among all left or right party bias perceptions. These ratios provide only information about a *relative* partisan bias and do not account for the number (or percentage) of respondents who perceive a partisan bias in the first place. The latter information is not important for the analyses reported below.

² In Germany, the right parties include CDU/CSU and FDP and left parties include SPD, Greens, and Left Party. In Greece, the right parties include New Democracy, Politiki Anixi, LAOS, and Extreme Right and left parties include PASOK, Left Coalition, Democratic Social Movement, Ecologists, and Communist Party.

Results

Media Audience Fragmentation in USA, Germany, and Greece: Ideological Self-Placement, Left Party Blocks, and Left Party Bias Perceptions

The U.S. is the reference case for partisan polarization. Figure 1 plots the average ideological positions of viewers of eight major broadcasters and cable channels as well as two comedy channels (top) and major newspapers (bottom). The users of both types of media exhibit a wide and distinct range of ideological positions. The audiences of the classic broadcasters ABC, CBS, and NBC as well as the cable channel CNN (and HLN) are ideologically moderate or centrist. Viewers of MSNBC and PBS, on the other hand, skew liberal while *Fox News* has a decidedly conservative (and fairly large) audience. This pattern confirms the claim of ideological polarization, even if it is driven primarily by one channel, *Fox News*. The range of audience polarization is very similar for newspapers, ranging from more liberal readers of the *New York Times* to more conservative readers of the *Wall Street Journal*.

How do these ideological self-placements match up with the partisan preferences and bias perceptions of viewers and readers? In Figure 2, the left party block share of the eight television (broadcast and cable) channels and seven major newspapers are plotted on the horizontal axis and the left bias perceptions on the vertical axis. The size of the round and square symbols for television channels and newspapers indicate the relative audience size of the media sources based on the survey respondents. The dashed line serves as a baseline and indicates the overall left party block ratio in the full sample.

This figure further confirms the expected polarization pattern for both partisan preferences and bias perceptions, at least for the 2008 presidential campaign. *Fox News* and the *Wall Street Journal* have an overwhelming Republican-identified audience and

are perceived to favor Republican candidates while (nearly) all other media sources are perceived to have a Democratic bias, no matter whether the audience is overwhelmingly Democratic or mixed. Only the cable channel *Headline News* exhibits a centrist position.³ The overwhelming perception of a Democratic bias might reflect both the traditional narrative of a Democratic media bias for mainstream media sources but could also reflect the particular circumstances of the 2008 campaign. The Democratic primaries and candidates were simply more interesting than the Republican primaries and candidates in that campaign.

With ideological and partisan polarization confirmed for the U.S., we can now turn to our second case, Germany. We further add a time dimension by comparing data from 1990 (CNEP data, West German respondents only) with 2009 GLES data to capture any changes that might have taken place (Figure 3). Compared to the U.S., the German audience for the two public and two commercial television channels shows hardly any sign of ideological polarization. In fact, the situation in 1990 and in 2009 shows basically no differences or changes. It rather suggests a depolarized media system that seems frozen in time. When it comes to newspapers and weekly magazines, ideological segmentation is clearly visible, ranging from *die tageszeitung* (taz) on the left to *Die Welt* on the right. The ideological position of the readers has undergone only minor changes in 20 years. In fact, the range of polarization even appears to have

³ This centrist position is somewhat of an artifact. The generic HLN audience skews liberal and sees a Democratic bias while the audience for one specific HLN program, *Glenn Beck*, skews conservative and is perceived to favor Republicans. After Glen Beck's departure of HLN for *Fox News* after the 2008 election, HLN would probably fall in the lower left corner of Figure 2.

decreased somewhat over time.⁴

This pattern is further supported by the left bias perception and left party block ratios plotted in Figure 4. The partisan audience shares of all four public and commercial media channels are nearly perfectly balanced, indicating again hardly any sign of partisan segmentation. The bias perception ratios for all four channels exhibit a minor bias toward the right, a result that might be attributed to the fact that Germany was governed by a grand coalition under the leadership of Angela Merkel of the conservative CDU at the time. But very few viewers perceived any partisan bias in all four channels in the first place (results not shown).

The picture changes for print media. Both left bias perception and left party block ratios (they correlate at $r=.99$) reflect the pattern already seen with the ideological self-placements of the readers. The newspapers with a larger readership have a more balanced audience, suggesting a strong centrist bias in the German media system.

The polarized U.S. and depolarized German media system can be compared to our third case, Greece, the representative of the Mediterranean polarized media system types with strong partisan commitments (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Because Greek media system went through rapid and significant changes in the 1990s, it will again be useful to compare two time points for which data is available (1996 and 2004 CNEP surveys). Figure 5 (top) shows a clear ideological segmentation of the Greek television audiences, with both polarization and segmentation increasing in the eight years between 1996 and 2004. The viewers of the public broadcaster ERT have a more leftist orientation while the commercial channels ANT1, Alter, and Star have audiences skewed to the right. Thus, Greece exhibits some symptoms of US-style partisan

⁴ This conclusion can only be tentative due to the use of different response scales in both years (a 10-point left-right scale in 1990 and an 11-point scale in 2009).

segmentation even though the range of ideological polarization is lower (as far as the different ideology scales allow such a comparison).

The readers of different Greek newspapers, on the other hand, cover a much wider ideological range, from the Communist Party newspaper *Rizospastis* on the left to *Eleftheros Typos* and *Apogevmatini* on the right. Because newspaper readers can be classified in three significantly different ideological groups in 1996 but four groups in 2004, it is possible to conclude that ideological segmentation is on the rise in Greece (based on an individual-level analysis of left-right placements; results not shown).

These patterns are again confirmed by the plot of left bias perception and left party block ratios (Figure 6). Given the changes in the Greek media system, plots for both 1996 and 2004 are shown. In 1996, there is clear evidence of partisan polarization in media bias perceptions. Both television channels and newspapers are overwhelmingly seen as either favouring parties on the right or the left. The partisan polarization of the television viewers, on the other hand, is much less pronounced. Despite a clear partisan pattern, television audiences remain fairly close to the partisan split in the full sample. Newspapers on the other hand cover the whole ideological range from left and right, for both bias perceptions and party blocks.

In 2004, the situation has changed to some extent. Television channel viewers cover a wider partisan range and exhibit much more differentiated party bias perceptions now. Newspapers follow a similar pattern, even if the partisan polarization has decline to some extent.

In conclusion, the comparison of USA, Germany, and Greece suggests that U.S.-style partisan segmentation and polarization in particular for television audiences cannot be found in all European countries. The depolarized German television audiences constitute a rather striking counter-case to the U.S., with Greece showing more similarities to the U.S. than the German case. The question whether the U.S. constitutes

an exceptional case thus requires a comparison with a wider range and a larger number of media systems. It is already clear, however, that European countries exhibit decisively different degrees of partisan segmentation and polarization.

Comparative Ideological Polarization in 29 Media Systems

For a large-scale comparative assessment of ideological polarization, we turn to the 2009 EES survey covering 28 European media systems in 27 countries (Flanders and Wallonia in Belgium are treated as two separate cases), complemented with data for the U.S. from the 2008 NAES. The measure for ideological polarization of television audiences and newspaper readers is based on the average ideological self-placement of media users. The aspirational goal is to use all major national (mainstream) television channels and newspapers to calculate a weighted media polarization measure.⁵ The current measure uses the average ideological position of the users of the (usually) two major news programs and three newspapers about which the respondents were explicitly asked. Audience polarization is determined by the maximum absolute difference between the ideological positions of the media audiences in each country.⁶

The most obvious determinant of the ideological polarization of media audiences

⁵ The 2009 EES asked respondents first about their exposure to (usually) two major national news programs and three major newspapers. These closed questions were followed by open-questions about any other news program or newspaper used more frequently than the already named sources. About half of the respondents provided at least one additional media source. This information covers all major national media.

⁶ For the U.S., the two television channels (*CNN* and *Fox News*) and newspapers (*New York Times* and *USA Today*) with the highest reported usage rates in the 2008 NAES are used.

is the overall ideological polarization in the population. For this purpose, public ideological polarization is measured in each country by the ratio of the number of survey respondents with an extreme ideological self-placement (left/liberal or right/conservative) divided by the number of respondents with neutral/moderate self-placements. This ratio essentially captures whether the ideological preferences of the public exert a centrifugal, polarizing pull towards the ideological extremes or a centripetal, depolarizing pull towards the moderate center (making no assumptions about whether media or public are pushing and pulling each other).

Figure 7 plots the television audience polarization on the vertical axis and the public ideological polarization on the horizontal axis (the country abbreviations are explained in Table 1). Public polarization ranges from Austria and Estonia as the most centrist countries to Cyprus as the most polarized country, followed at some distance by Italy. The public polarization of the U.S. falls approximately in the middle of the observed polarization in European countries.

Due to the considerable ideological gap between television news channel audiences, the U.S. emerges as a clear outlier compared to all other European media systems. The ideological differences of European television audiences (for the main news programs) never exceed one scale point on the 11-point left-right scale. For the U.S., the difference between CNN and *Fox News* audiences is also one scale point on the 5-point liberal-conservative scale, but it constitutes a much larger gap considering the different measurement scales. Overall, however, the relationship between public ideological polarization and television audience polarization is fairly low ($r=.15$, *ns*, with USA, $r=.25$, *ns*, without USA). All countries with a centrist public but also many countries with a more polarized public exhibit a very low level of television audience polarization, including even the most polarized country Cyprus. The highest level of television audience polarization exists in Malta, followed by Italy, Spain, and France –

countries with Mediterranean polarized media systems.

For newspapers, the pattern changes considerably. The range of newspaper reader polarization is much higher and reaches nearly 3.5 scale points for Cyprus, followed at a short distance by Italy. The U.S. is no longer an outlier and rather joins other European countries with high press-party parallelism. The relationship between the ideological polarization of public and newspaper readers is therefore moderate to strong ($r=.58$, $p<.01$).

The reported media polarization levels obviously depend to a considerable degree on the choice of specific media sources. Using different media can and will lead to somewhat different estimates of ideological polarization. Consequently, it will be necessary to confirm the current results with audience polarization measures that are based on a wider range of media sources. In addition, additional factors that might explain the levels of media polarization need to be considered such as the strength of public broadcasting, regulations, journalistic norms, and commercialization.

Discussion

The goal of our research was to assess the claim partisan fragmentation and polarization from a comparative perspective to determine whether the case of the U.S. is exceptional or rather a precursor of developments in other western media systems. The results suggest that the U.S. is indeed an exceptional case when it comes to television audiences, but a phenomenon that is primarily driven by a single cable television channel, *Fox News*. When it comes to newspapers, the U.S. is not much different from other western countries, in part because the media systems of these countries vary considerably.

Our results give further support to the argument of a “friendly media phenomenon” by Goldman and Mutz (2011). Given some overlap in the use of CNEP

data, this might not be very surprising. However, the phenomenon holds for additional surveys and appears to be a very robust finding across different countries and across time. Our research cannot say much about the causes or consequences of de facto selective exposure but rather provide evidence that it exists.

Our data suggests that ideological and partisan fragmentation is a relative and not an absolute phenomenon. Very few media sources have an entirely one-sided audience, with some obvious exceptions such as the Greek Communist Party newspaper. But any media source with a larger audience has viewers or readers with a wide range of partisan preferences. In fact, the (recent) Greek and U.S. television audiences and all newspaper readers exhibit a rather graduated pattern of ideological segmentation, not polarization in two distinct camps. In particular the Greek evidence suggests that these patterns can change even within a limited period of time.

If we treat the U.S. as an exceptional case in terms of partisan polarization, Germany provides an equally striking contrast due to the complete absence of any remarkable degree of ideological polarization among television audiences. Our comparative analysis suggests that many more countries might show such a depolarized pattern, but the inclusion of a wider range of television channels will be necessary for more robust results.

It should be noted that our analysis treats media audiences as aggregates. As Goldman and Mutz (2011) stress, aggregate and individual patterns might exhibit significant differences. This means that aggregate patterns of media audience segmentation do not say much about the individual level experience of a very limited set of media sources. It will be necessary to take a closer look at individual level exposure patterns to different media sources, and in particular compare those using only a single news source with those that are exposed to different sources.

Methodologically, the comparison of different countries and different surveys

poses difficult challenges, especially if measures and scales differ to some extent. Given the consistent pattern of ideological and partisan segmentation in our detailed analyses of USA, Germany, and Greece, we are fairly confident that audience ideology is a useful indicator of partisan segmentation and polarization. The combination of the more fine-grained European left-right scale with the shorter U.S. liberal-conservative scale appears to work quite well. While the exact value or size of indicators based on different scales have to be interpreted very cautiously, the supplementary country-specific evidence suggests that the observed differences make sense – *Fox News* viewers are highly distinct – and the overall pattern of results is thus quite reasonable. The more important methodological challenge is the development of a better measure of ideological polarization that takes more than just two or three media sources into account.

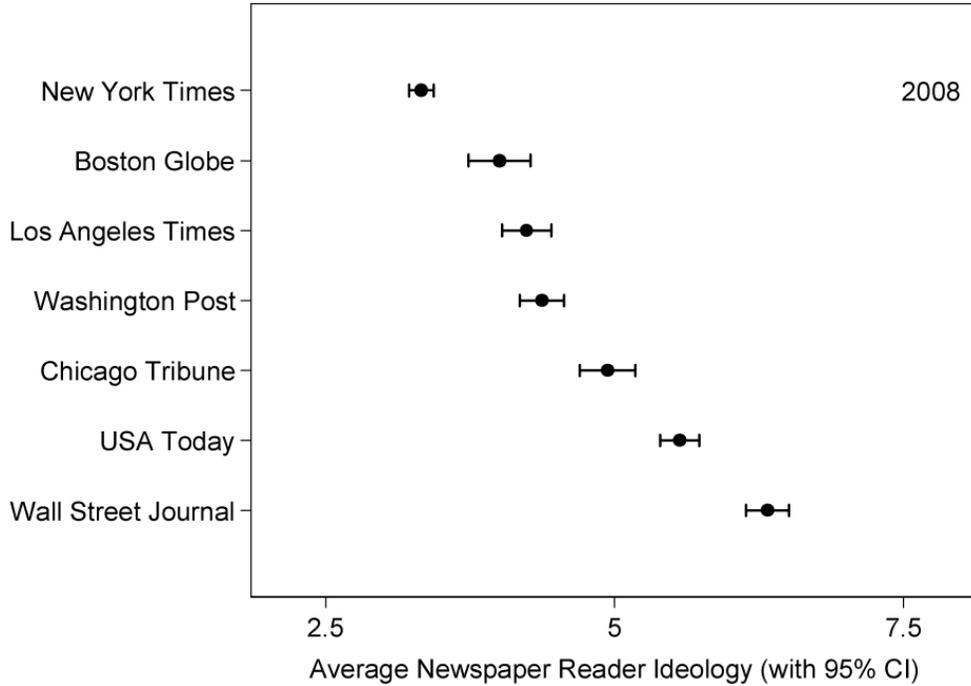
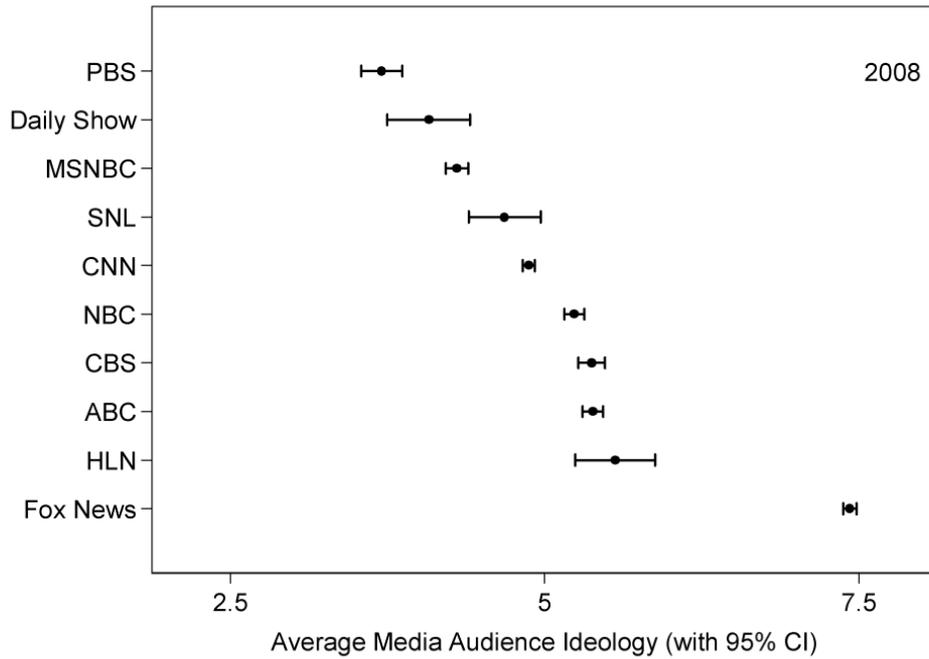
Finally, the current paper lacks, with the exception of public ideological polarization, both a discussion and analysis of other factors associated with the ideological polarization of media audiences. A causal explanation of causes and consequences will remain rather difficult, but important institutional rules and structures such as the tradition of public broadcasting can be taken into account.

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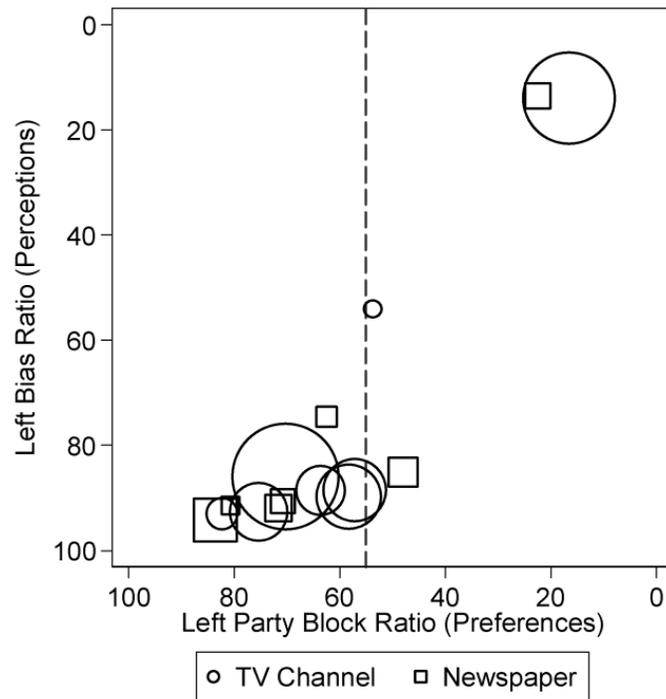
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Figure 1: Audience Ideology for TV Channels and Newspapers in the USA (2008)



Source: NAES 2008 (RCS)

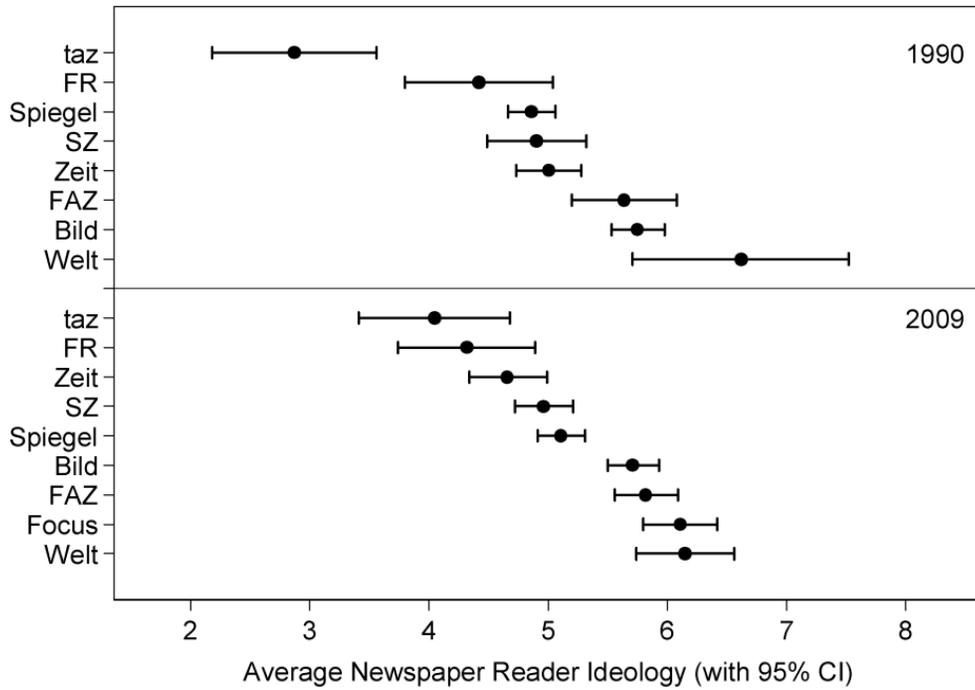
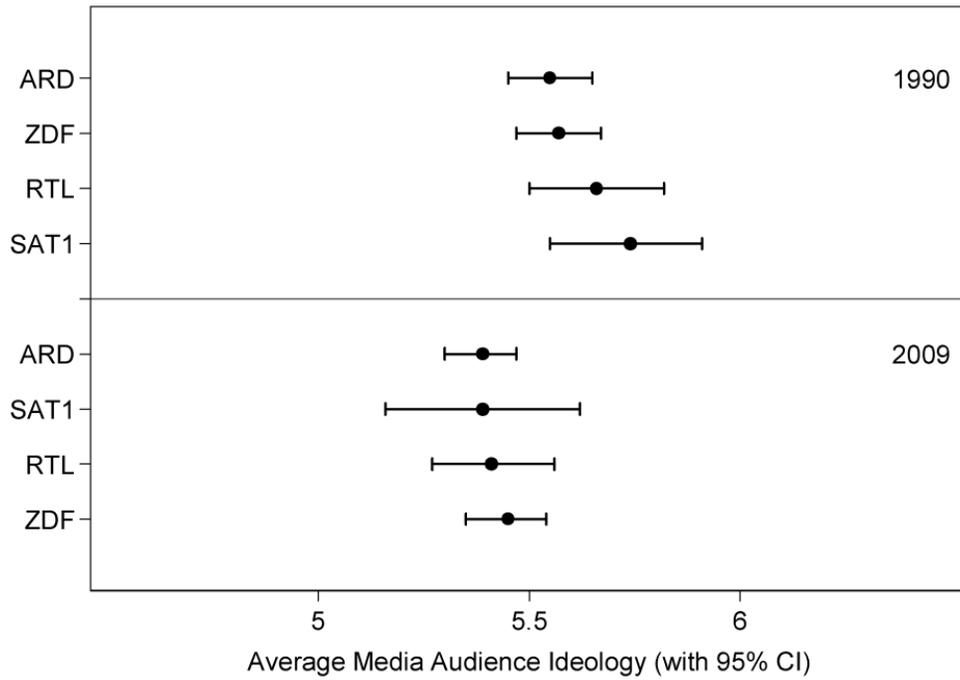
Figure 2: Left Bias Perceptions and Left Party Block Ratios in the USA (2008)



Source: NAES 2008 (RCS)

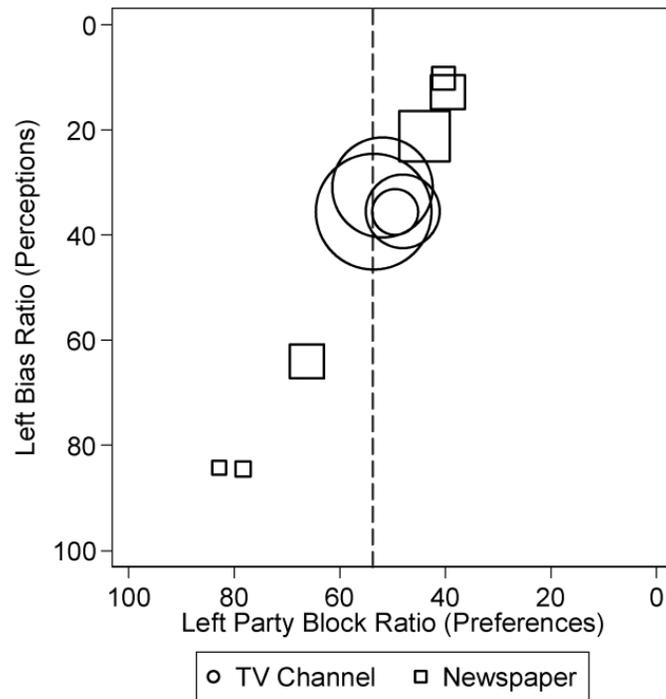
Note: The size of markers represents their relative audience size based on sample estimates.

Figure 3: Audience Ideology for TV Channels and Newspapers in Germany (1990 and 2009)



Source: CNEP Germany 1990 (Main Respondent Wave 1, West Germany); GLES 2009 (RCS)

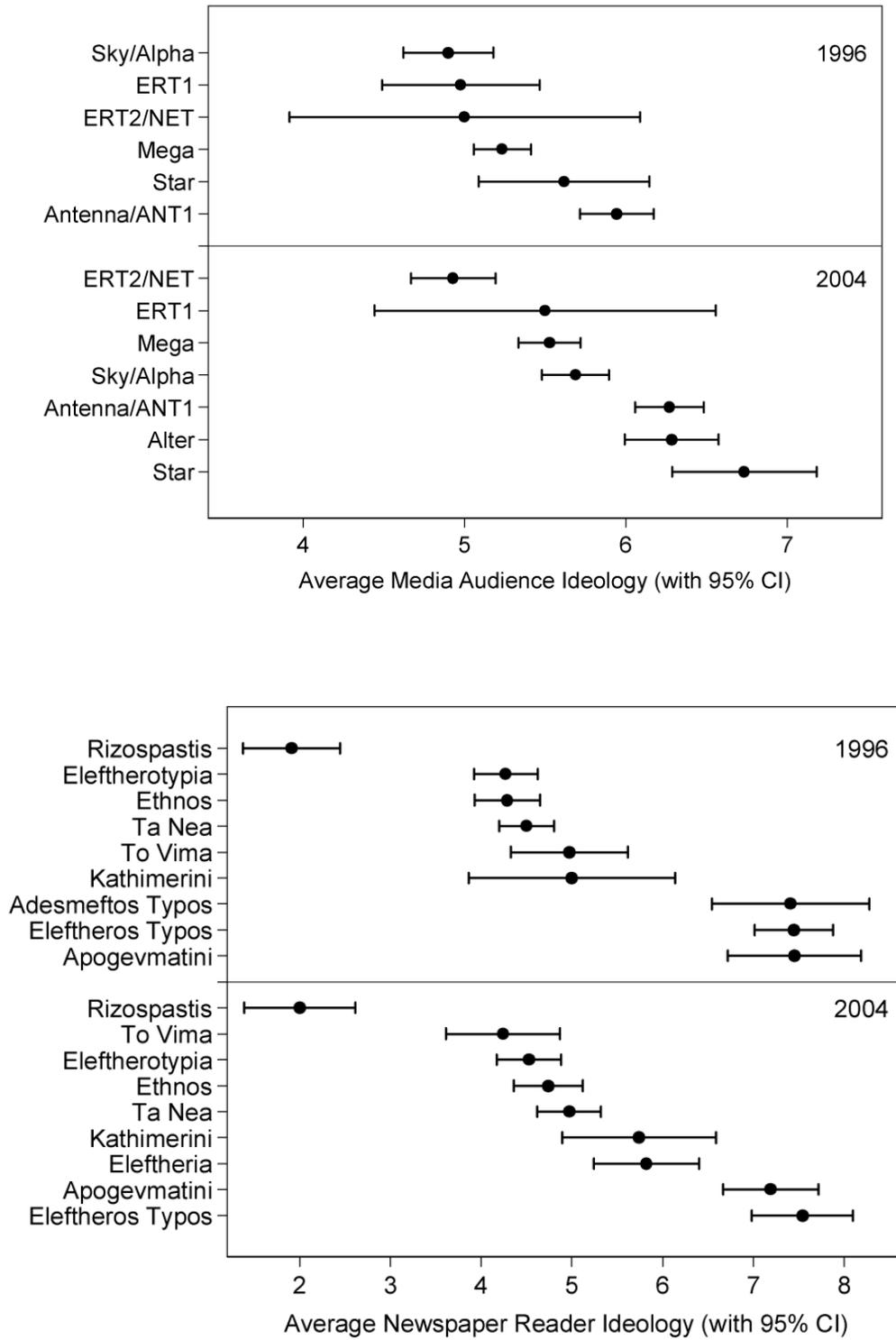
Figure 4: Left Bias Perceptions and Left Party Block Ratios in Germany (2009)



Source: GLES 2009 (RCS)

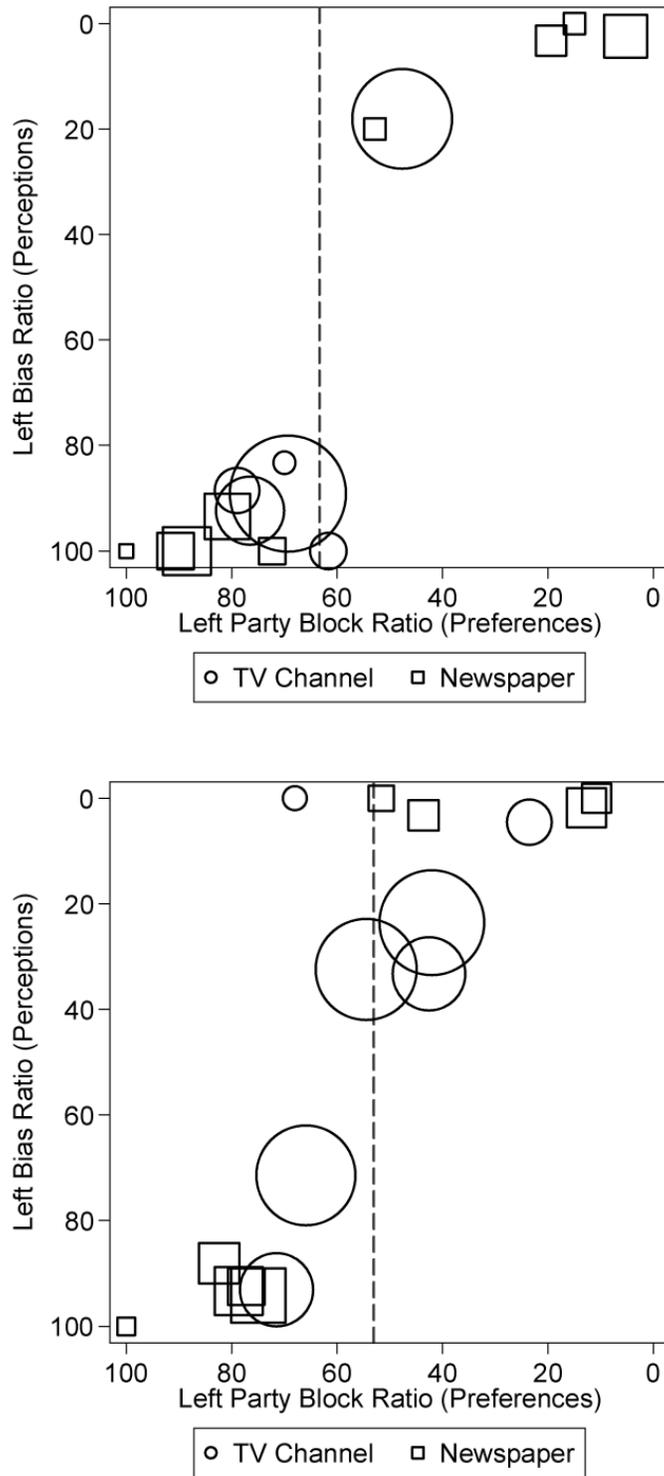
Note: The size of markers represents their relative audience size based on sample estimates.

Figure 5: Audience Ideology for TV Channels and Newspapers in Greece (1996 and 2004)



Source: CNEP Greece 1996, CNEP Greece 2004

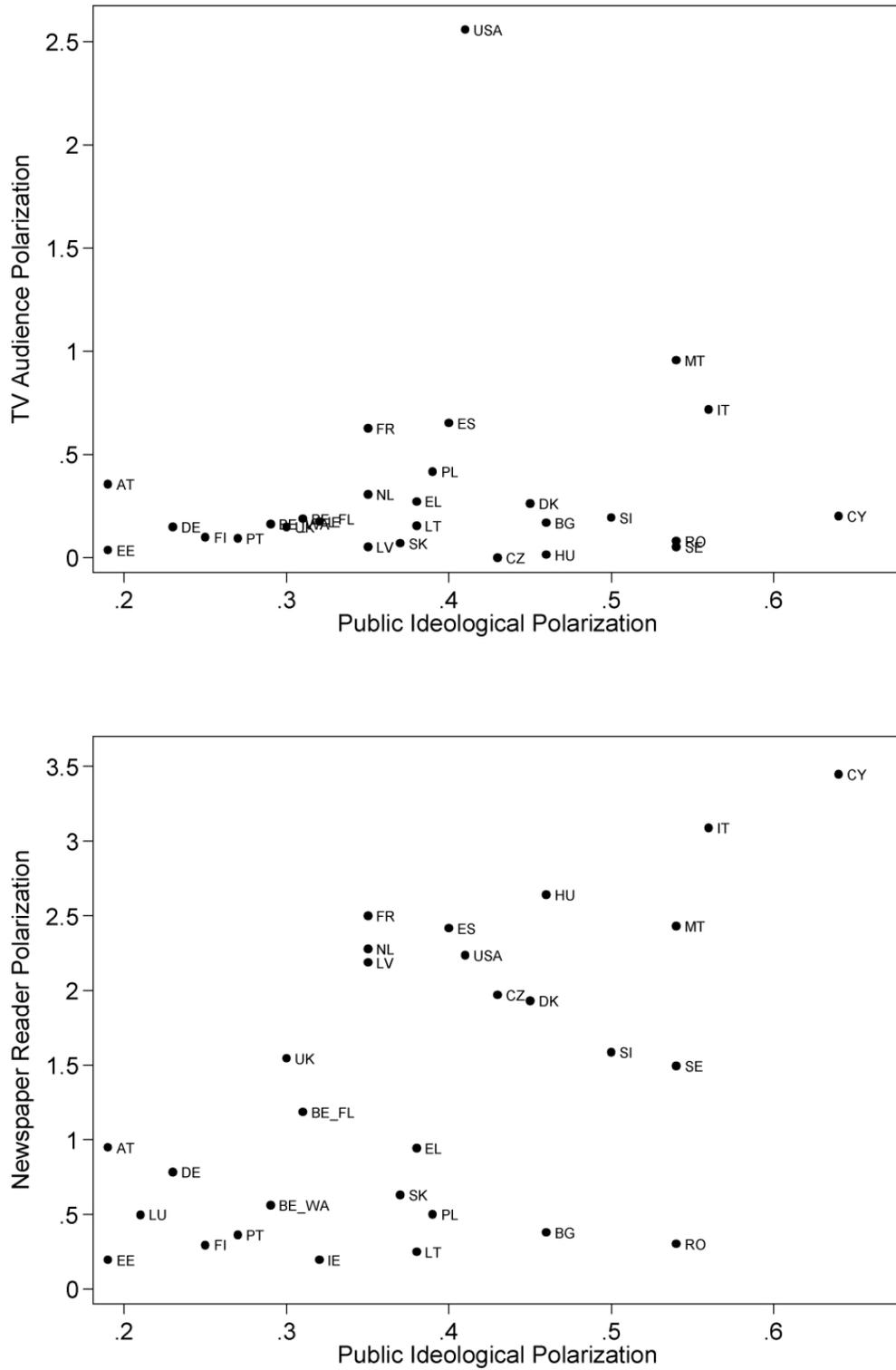
Figure 6: Left Bias Perceptions and Left Party Block Ratios in Greece (1996 & 2004)



Source: CNEP Greece 1996, CNEP Greece 2004.

Note: The size of markers represents their relative audience size based on sample estimates.

Figure 7: Comparative Polarization of Media Audience and Public (2009)



Source: EES 2009, NAES 2008 (RCS)
 Note: See Table 1 for the full country names.

Table 1: Country Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Country
AT	Austria
BE_FL	Belgium – Flanders
BE_WA	Belgium – Wallonia
BG	Bulgaria
CY	Cyprus
CZ	Czech Republic
DE	Germany
DK	Denmark
EE	Estonia (Estland)
EL	Greece
ES	Spain
FI	Finland
FR	France
HU	Hungary
IE	Ireland
IT	Italy
LT	Lithuania
LU	Luxembourg
LV	Latvia
MT	Malta
NL	Netherlands
PL	Poland
PT	Portugal
RO	Romania
SE	Sweden
SI	Slovenia
SK	Slovakia
UK	Great Britain
USA	United States of America
